Manitoba
Culture, Heritage
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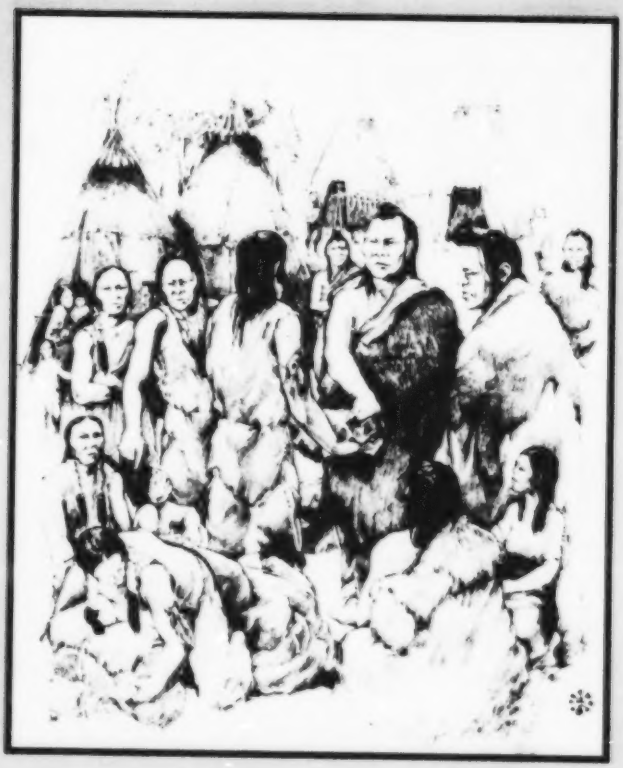
Historic Resources

ANCIENT TRADERS IN SOUTHERN MANITOBA



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ANCIENT TRADERS IN SOUTHERN MANITOBA

Introduction

Trade is an important activity in today's world, for more than just economic reasons. Nations that are strong trading partners are usually good friends, and barriers to trade can be used as weapons against hostile countries. For prehistoric Manitobans, though, trade went beyond this. The friendly relationships produced by trading could mean survival in hard times.

The Nature Of Early Trade

Ten thousand years ago, people in Manitoba were nomadic hunters dependent on herd animals that migrated with the seasons. There were very few hunters compared to the huge size of the the herds, and people could be sure of a steady food supply once they learned the habits and the whereabouts of the animals in each season. But weather is unpredictable and the herds did not always arrive "on schedule". People without the technology to store food for long periods depended on a steady supply of food. Decades of plenty were little comfort in a year of famine.

Fluctuations in climate had different impacts in different areas. Droughts or floods that disrupted herd movements could be disastrous for bison hunters on the plains, but might have no effect on sheep hunters in the Rocky Mountains. People affected by regional food shortages had to be on good terms with their neighbours if they wanted help from them and also had to demonstrate charity when their neighbours needed it. Isolation can promote distrust and fear. Therefore, to maintain friendly relations, different groups had to meet regularly, or have some sort of formal friendship agreement between themselves.

Good relations could be established and kept up through trading. Frequently the act of exchanging goods was more important than the economic benefits of trade. Except in times of hardship, most regions produced enough basic food to feed their populations, and trading was done mainly to vary the local diet or to get decorations for clothing or homes.

The value of trade objects increased with their rarity. The further goods were from their source, the more rare they became. For instance, a spear point made of an exotic stone common to the Hudson Bay area might have

Bargaining for a shell gorget.

little value there, but would have considerably more a thousand kilometres away in southern Manitoba. Rare items were often buried with people when they died, as symbols of their status and to permanently take the objects out of circulation. This gave added value to similar objects still in use. Due to their symbolic value, exotic materials were often made into objects with much greater care and skill than was given to common materials.

Due to trade, a prehistoric hunter in Manitoba may have acquired and used a number of extremely well-made spear points fashioned in a variety of regional styles out of unique types of stone from distant sources. Many hand-to-hand transactions over hundreds of kilometres brought the objects to Manitoba and might, in time, have taken them to more remote places.

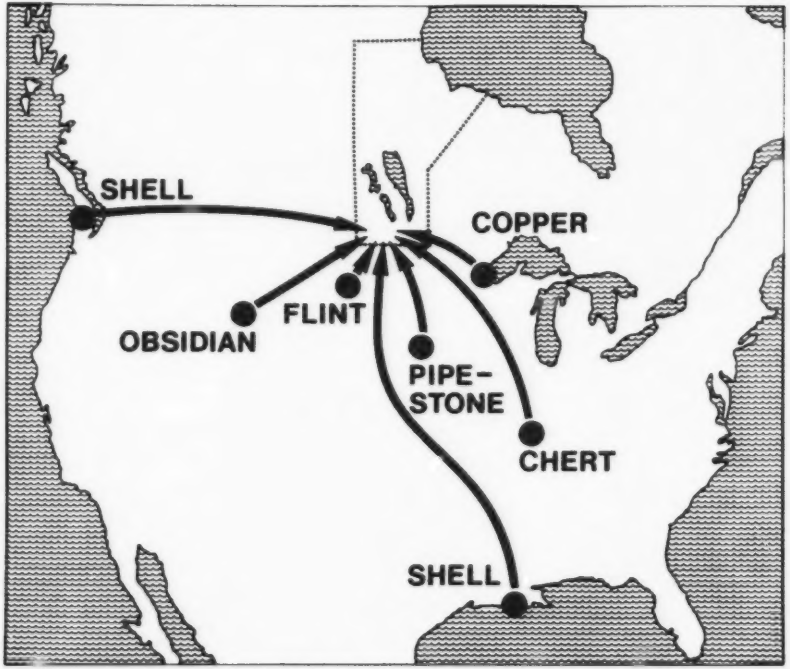
Obsidian

Acquiring useful materials or objects that were not available locally has been proven to be a major reason for trade. A type of volcanic glass known as **obsidian** has only a few North American sources, mainly in British Columbia, California, Wyoming and Alaska, but objects made of this material have been found in southern Manitoba. Obsidian is an extremely brittle stone and, when made into blades by a skilled worker, produces the sharpest cutting edge known. Until recently, obsidian blades were used for shaving in Mexican barbershops and have even been used in open-heart surgery because they are sharper than stainless steel scalpels.

Obsidian was traded across prehistoric North America. In locations far from its sources, even small scraps had value and were hoarded. Some of these fragments were made into useable tools but, despite its superior sharpness, owning only one obsidian spear point or scraping tool would not give a hunter any great advantage in everyday life. However, its special and symbolic importance as a rare material was also exploited. South of the Great Lakes, large ornamental objects were often made of obsidian, probably for religious rituals, and were frequently placed in graves, presumably for use by people's souls in the afterlife.

Knife River Flint

Another important stone was **Knife River Flint**, found in its natural state only in western North Dakota. This material, like obsidian, makes excellent tools when chipped and was traded throughout central Canada and the United States for thousands of years. There is evidence that various groups struggled for control of the flint quarries as a way to benefit economically by dominating trade in this material.



Places of origin of exotic raw materials that occur in southern Manitoba.

Catlinite

Catlinite was another highly-valued stone, but one which was imported for other reasons. Unlike obsidian, catlinite was a soft, often reddish material which readily lent itself to fashioning by means of grinding and polishing. Accordingly, quantities of this stone were imported from quarries near what is today Pipestone, Minnesota, for the making of smoking pipes, gorgets and other ceremonial and decorative items.

Copper

Native copper was another widely traded material. It is a readily-available, almost pure metal from the Lake Superior basin that is easily made into tools by either cold hammering or forging. Although the first copper articles may have been made about 7000 years ago, the best craftsmanship was done between 3000 and 5000 years ago.

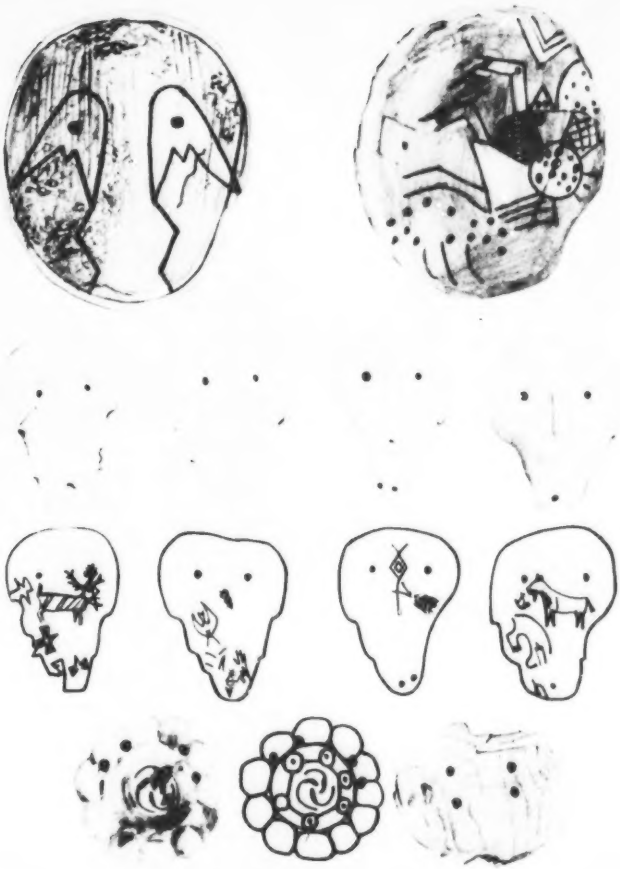
Members of the "Old Copper Culture" made a wide variety of tools from native copper. They moved into eastern Manitoba from the Lake Superior area at least 4000 years ago and fashioned a variety of copper articles locally, using raw copper imported from the east. Tools made by these people were much more widely distributed than the people who made them. Examples have been found from Alberta to New York State and from northern Saskatchewan and Ontario as far south as Illinois. Manitoba's central position between the source of native copper and the outer range of tool distribution could have allowed Manitoba's branch of the Old Copper Culture to play an important part in the distribution of these articles.

Shell

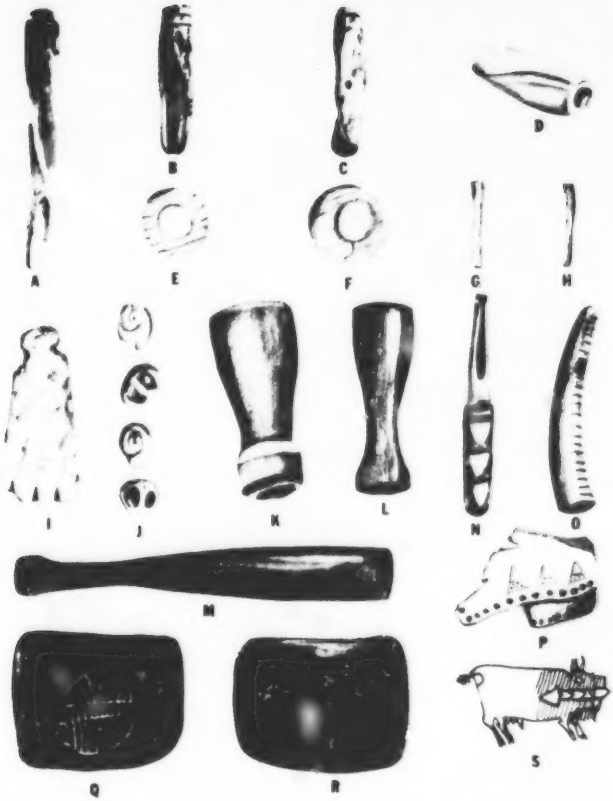
About 3000 years ago, a series of widespread religious cults became prominent in North America and had a major part in organizing continental trade networks. One of these cults, centered in the Illinois River Valley, was flourishing at the time of Christ. A thousand years later, a second was focussed in the Mississippi Valley and was influenced by Mexican civilizations further south.

The peoples of both cultures were concerned with life after death and tried to provide for it by burying useful articles with those who died, to ensure their well-being in the afterlife. They built elaborate burial mounds as graves for people of high status and filled them with exotic articles from all corners of the continent. Some such mounds were built in southern Manitoba and contained various kinds of **shells** from the Atlantic coast, the Pacific coast and the Gulf of Mexico. These were often made into beads or pendants, such as two which were found carved to resemble a human face with the facial markings of a peregrine falcon.

Trading at the "Shoshone Rendezvous".



Shell gorgets from Manitoba and surrounding areas.



Prehistoric trade goods:
A-D) whelk columella beads; G-H) bird bone beads; I) notched shell pendant; J) drilled marine shells; K-M) tubular pipes; N) antler tine knife handle; O) antler tine handle for beaver incisor gouge; P) perforated bone "bracelet"; Q-R) two sides of incised catlinite tablet; S) incised bison design on shell.

Agricultural Produce

About 1000 years ago, the ancestors of the Huron and Iroquois were farmers growing corn in southern Ontario. They began to live in large villages about that time and had developed into mixed-crop farmers well before the arrival of the Europeans in North America. The documents of early explorers show that these tribes traded corn, beans, sunflower seeds, sunflower oil, tobacco, hemp and medicinal herbs to the Algonkian people on their north and west, in exchange for furs, meat and fish. Modern Algonkians include members of the Cree and Ojibwa nations that occupy much of Manitoba. Unfortunately, organic materials such as food or furs are destroyed by the acidic soil of forests covering this particular trading area. The trade goods described in early records have not survived natural decomposition and cannot be studied by archaeologists. However, corn and fish must have been transported in containers of some sort, and the distinctive styles of Algonkian and Iroquoian pottery are found throughout southern Ontario, northwestern Ontario and, less frequently, in southern Manitoba. The fragments of Iroquoian pottery found in Manitoba are much more likely to have arrived by trade than by immigration of people from southern Ontario.

About the same time, people in the Dakotas also began to grow corn and live in permanent villages. The best known at the time of European contact were the Mandan and Hidatsa villages near the mouth of North Dakota's Knife River and the Arikara villages in South Dakota, near the mouth of the Grand River. These settlements provided nomadic hunters in southern Manitoba with a nearby source of farm produce and a market for untreated bison hides. The farmers could easily hunt and the hunters knew how to farm, so there was no real need to trade. Trading allowed them the freedom to choose their respective ways of life and to prosper as well.

Trade Fairs

This local trading grew into a successful trade network centered in the Dakotas and connected to other networks to the south and west. Periodically, representatives from each area would meet to hold "trade fairs". For instance, at the "Shoshone Rendezvous" in Wyoming, goods from Manitoba and the Dakotas would be exchanged for items from as far west as the Pacific Ocean. Through trading, shells from the West Coast travelled at least 2000 kilometres to the Prairies. A 4000-year-old "foreign" shell discovered in Saskatchewan demonstrates the age of this type of trading. The Dakota network also extended south to the Gulf of Mexico, which was the source of whelk shells found in Manitoba sites.

Prehistoric trade fairs also provided opportunities to renew old acquaintances, arrange marriages and to spend a lot of time singing, dancing and telling stories. Unfortunately, because trade networks allowed contact between large numbers of people from all over North America, they also contributed to the decline and destruction of many cultures.

Trade With Europeans

The first Europeans to appear in the center of the continent were often trying to make their fortunes from goods and materials found there. The ancient trade routes were custom-made for this, and territories were often occupied by European traders long before they had been explored by representatives of government. Valuable materials, especially furs, were moved east along the old trade routes for shipment to Europe, while European goods such as guns, horses, metal containers and beads moved far inland over the same ancient networks.

The old trade routes also transmitted diseases against which the Natives had no defences. Native farmers in the Dakotas had also been successful merchants for centuries, and the resulting wealth, which attracted invaders, made fortified settlements necessary. But wooden stockades were useless against epidemics carried along the trade networks by Europeans and by other Natives. The Mandan and other prosperous tribes of traders fell victims to smallpox early in the European occupation of North America.

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ANCIENT TRADERS IN SOUTHERN MANITOBA

Native peoples of Manitoba established and used wide-ranging trade networks thousands of years before the arrival of European fur traders. Bands and trading parties brought goods over immense distances for exchange at a trade fair or rendezvous. A wide variety of goods, including ornaments and ritual objects made of special seashells such as dentalium from the Pacific Ocean and conch from the Gulf of Mexico, were exchanged in this area. Obsidian (volcanic glass), which produces the sharpest cutting edge ever known, came from Wyoming. Copper from Lake Superior, Knife River Flint from North Dakota, and catlinite (red pipestone) from southern Minnesota were also traded. Artifacts made from these rare materials were valuable economically and their exchange promoted social and political ties among neighbouring populations.

THE MANITOBA HERITAGE COUNCIL

PROVINCIAL COMMEMORATIVE PLAQUES PROGRAM

Manitoba's Provincial Commemorative Plaques Program honours those people, places and events which have contributed to the province's development. To date, more than 100 plaques have been erected.

Proposals to commemorate Manitoba's heritage resources come from many sources, including interested groups and individuals. After careful research by the Historic Resources Branch, proposals are submitted for recommendations to an advisory board composed of historians, archaeologists, architects, and others active in the heritage field. Those deemed to have provincial rather than local significance are forwarded to the Minister of Culture, Heritage and Recreation for final decision.

Plaques are usually located at sites associated with the people, places or events being honoured.